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Democracy or Intellect: the Scottish Educational Dilemma of the Twentieth Century

Lindsay Paterson

1. Introduction

It is half a century since the publication of the book that has done more to shape debate about Scottish education than any other (except ultimately the First Book of Discipline). When George Davie's *The Democratic Intellect* appeared in 1961, its meaning would probably have been more widely evident than it has been since.¹ The essential problem of interpretation may be summed up tritely as one of where to put the stress. Is Scottish education characterised by democracy, to which the intellect contributes, or is it shaped by the intellect, enjoining it to behave in democratic ways? Walter Elliot, from whom Davie borrowed his title, would have had no doubt that it was the latter. 'Democratic intellectualism', which is the term that Elliot actually coined in 1932, is not in any doubt that the emphasis is to be on the character of the mind, and Elliot defined it thus:

it is a heritage wherein discipline is rigidly and ruthlessly enforced, but where criticism and attack are unflinching, continuous, and salt with a bitter and jealous humour. It is a heritage wherein intellect, speech and, above all, argument are the passports to the highest eminence in the land.²

The competitiveness and exclusion inherent in such an image then have provoked the main counter-story to that told by Davie - the claim that Scottish education is inherently hierarchical, unequal and destructive of spontaneity and creativity.

This is no mere terminological quibble, or device of rhetoric, because whether 'democracy' or 'intellect' is to have primacy determines not only education itself but also how we interpret the Scottish experience of the twentieth century generally. The significance is greater still, indeed, because it raises questions of social order and good government. Again in Davie's words:

The words 'democratic intellect' offer a twentieth-century formulation of an old problem. Does the control of a group ... belong, as of right, to the few (the experts) exclusively, and not at all to the ignorant many? Or are the many entitled to share the control, because the limited knowledge of the many, when it is pooled and critically restated through mutual discussion, provides a lay consensus capable of revealing certain of the limitations of interest in the experts' point of view? Or thirdly it may be held that this consensus knowledge of the many entitles them to have full control, excluding the experts.³

Davie's dilemma is thus between expertise and populism. To him, any kind of deliberate radicalism was a 'short-cut to a material utopia'⁴, a mechanical response where what was needed was the wide diffusion of moral responsibility trained through the intellect:

a polity which postpones the spiritual or cultural problems of society in favour of an unrestricted material advance based on intensive specialisation produces the dangerous consequences of an intellectual atomisation of society.⁵

The dilemma that he outlines is also the dilemma of Scottish education: he did not invent the problem (as indeed his citation of Elliot and Elliot's contemporaries such as Herbert Grierson and Hugh MacDiarmid makes clear). Those who have governed and sought to reform the system have recurrently tried to reconcile these two poles of intellect and democracy, selection and access, knowledge from a tradition and practical utility.⁶ The purpose of this chapter is to examine not their intentions so much as the outcomes of what they tried to do.

The chapter is mainly concerned with developments in secondary schooling, not only because, until the very last decade of the century, that was the sector where by far the most change was happening,⁷ but also because Davie mostly ignores its fundamental importance. Within the story of the development of secondary schooling, the curriculum matters as much as school structures, because the meaning of the twentieth-century educational experience lies in the ideas that have been offered to young people rather than merely in their opportunities to move through institutions or to acquire credentials. Attempting to cover the whole century in one chapter is of course too ambitious, and many of the details inevitably will be lost; but something like this sweep is necessary to understand the long-term consequences of educational reform. The guiding questions here are then: is the twentieth-century story really one of decline from the intellectual distinction of the old university curriculum, as Davie would allege? Or is it, by contrast, a process of heroically asserting a humane educational practice against the sort of competitive ethos that Elliot celebrated? Or is neither of these competing stories subtle enough to capture what actually happened?⁸

2. The beginnings of reform: secondary schooling in the 1920s and 1930s

2.1 Development of secondary schooling to the 1930s

Nevertheless, however important the curriculum is, the developing structures of schooling matter because they shape the opportunity to learn anything important. The starting point to understanding how secondary education developed in Scotland in the twentieth century, and how it related to inherited ideas about a worthwhile curriculum, is that it barely existed previously. The country did have a long tradition of providing higher education in parish schools, the advanced classes where the mythological tradition of open access to higher learning was located, but the concept of a properly secondary sector did not emerge coherently until the last part of the nineteenth century. There were then some 56 proper secondary schools, many of ancient lineage and most surviving on the basis of endowments. Within that group, there were schools which the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act designated as 'Higher Class' schools, the rather token recognition which that legislation gave to the older parochial tradition. Their number rose from a dozen to around twenty by the beginning of the new century, but their development was restricted because the school boards (also set up by the Act) were not permitted to use public money to support them.

The real expansion of secondary education then happened in the two decades 1900-1920, and the important first move came in 1899, when the Scotch Education Department recognised a category of Higher Grade school. These were, at first,

intended to be specialist scientific schools, like the schools of that name which were emerging in parts of England.⁹ But, whereas in England such schools were restricted from the first decade of the century to quite low-level technical instruction, in Scotland the Department under Henry Craik and then John Struthers permitted them to move in quite the opposite direction. From 1903 they could provide the same kinds of course as the Higher Class and endowed schools, and after 1908 they could extend this to the full five years of secondary education. Thereafter a Higher Grade school which had been recognised for this purpose was, in an administrative sense, the same as an older full secondary school. The number of Higher Grade schools grew rapidly, from 75 in 1903-4, through 164 in 1906-7 to 196 by 1918-19; at that time, they contained 60 per cent of the pupils on publicly financed secondary courses.¹⁰

The Higher Grade schools served districts populated mainly by the lower middle class and the skilled working class, and mostly were free or charged only low fees.¹¹ In fact, they were rarely wholly new foundations, often being built up from parish schools that had a tradition of providing higher subjects: they thus became the main twentieth-century carrier of that tradition. The SED's rationale for all this was that the country would benefit from encouraging the education of talented young people wherever they might be found. In Struthers's words when he was still assistant secretary of the SED, writing in 1903 to an inspector in Fife: 'if there is [in a neighbourhood] any considerable body of pupils who may be expected to remain on at school till 15 or 16 then there is a *prima facie* case for the recognition of a Higher Grade department'.¹²

The structure of the courses offered in this secondary system was also such as to encourage opportunity. The content of the courses will be considered below, but the main organisational feature, from 1912, was that secondary education was officially in two, progressive stages, a three-year 'intermediate' stage, and a further two years beyond that which would lead to the Leaving Certificate. Inaugurated in 1888, the Leaving Certificate marked the end of a full secondary course, analogously to the contemporary development of such assessment in other countries - the Baccalauréat in francophone countries, the Abitur in the German-speaking ones.¹³ This two-stage Scottish structure encouraged access to secondary schooling because pupils whose parents could not afford to keep them at school for five years could follow a well-constructed course over a shorter period. The most able of these pupils could then be encouraged by bursaries to stay on for five years, especially after provision for these was made more systematic in the Education (Scotland) Act of 1918. Also encouraging participation was the provision for schools to be recognised as 'Intermediate', for the provision of the three-year course only. Some of them were subsequently upgraded, but, even when they were not, they represented a further way in which the tradition of providing higher subjects in the public schools was maintained.

The momentum of this expansion was abruptly halted by official SED restrictions imposed from 1925, outlined in a circular issued in 1921 that subsequently has become infamous.¹⁴ The important point about this controversial episode was that the two-stage system was now officially discouraged, thus requiring pupils to commit themselves to a full five years of secondary education with all the expense and forgoing of earnings which that entailed. This was undoubtedly a serious shift of policy, but it was not a complete reversal, because most of the former Higher Grade schools now were recognised as full secondaries. The secondary sector thus consisted of approximately 250 schools by the 1930s, some four times more numerous than in 1900 (even though the size of the relevant age groups had risen by no more than about

5%),¹⁵ indicating that a great deal of the expansion of the earlier decades had been maintained. By the 1930s, moreover, about one third of the age group was entering full secondary courses, and, although only one in twenty completed them in the sense of taking the examinations for the Leaving Certificate, that reach was quite high by wider European standards.¹⁶ From the 1920s, new teachers of secondary subjects had to possess a relevant degree from a university or a central institution (the higher technological colleges which the SED had established in each region of the country),¹⁷ so that by the 1930s some two thirds of teachers were graduates.¹⁸ After 1923, all heads of subject department had to have a relevant Honours degree.

In short, the post-primary-school system from 1924 was in four broad segments: the old secondaries, the pioneering secondaries that had started as Higher Grade schools and that had achieved secondary status by 1923, the newer secondaries created after that, and the remainder, which were elementary schools providing some two years of modestly advanced classes to around two thirds of the pupil population. Allocation between the senior-secondary courses, which were in principle five years long, and the shorter courses was mainly by tests of general intelligence taken in the final year of primary school.

2.2 Leaving Certificate

So what was taught in these courses - what opportunities to acquire significant culture were offered or restricted by these new structures? The five-year courses were intended to lead to the Leaving Certificate¹⁹, the SED's means of defining and regulating the curriculum of secondary education. So to understand that curriculum, and to understand the model of a proper secondary education which it embodied, it is to the Leaving Certificate that we must turn. By the 1920s, the Leaving Certificate had become the normal route of entry to the universities, to the advanced courses of the central institutions, or directly to the training courses of the professions.

Subjects in the curriculum were assessed individually, mostly by written examination (although with the significant exception of science, where laboratory work was assessed directly by school inspectors). In most subjects in this period, these examinations took place at two levels, Higher and Lower. However, the SED came to believe that a wholly open choice of subjects was fragmenting pupils' learning, and so, from 1902, a Group Certificate was offered, this becoming, in effect, mandatory from 1908: according to it, a Certificate would be awarded only if certain officially recognised combinations of subjects had been passed. So the curriculum of full secondary pupils was strongly shaped by the grouping requirements. These rules were complicated, and underwent several changes, but two consistent principles were that English was compulsory and that some degree of breadth was enforced (requiring candidates to take both a language and either mathematics or a science).

In essence, therefore, the curricular principles governing the Leaving Certificate reflected the shift to the schools of the old principles of liberal education, and thus also the old principles of the undergraduate degree. Accompanying that shift, three significant changes had taken place, representing a modernisation of the principle of curricular breadth and thus in effect a modernisation of the meaning of a liberal education. These changes involved, first, the rise to prominence of English over Latin and its assuming something of the place that moral philosophy used to have in the undergraduate programme. The view taken of the place of English at that time may be summed up by a comment in 1910 from A. M. Williams, who was head of the Glasgow centre for training teachers: 'the place of literature in moral education', he

argued, was to make people after Milton's ideal, 'fitted to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war'.²⁰ As it was put in 1899 by Simon Laurie (first holder of the chair of education at Edinburgh University), the study of literature is 'the making of a good citizen'²¹, because appreciating the beauty of a great literary work will tend to improve the reader's character. John Strong, rector of the high school in Edinburgh, argued in 1919 that the study of literature encouraged the 'constant exercise of the judgement, and ever present appeal to wider and deeper sympathies, and a gradual development of the sense of harmony and beauty'²². Indeed, at the 1918 annual meeting of the English Association (a professional grouping of teachers of English at both secondary and university level), Charles Herford, Professor of English Literature at Manchester University, argued that literary studies could take on the cultural role played by philosophy at the Scottish universities²³.

The second change also involved Latin - the emergence of French alongside it, representing an attempt to make liberal education of contemporary relevance, as in fact had recurrently happened to liberal education since its invention during the European Renaissance.²⁴ John Burnet - professor of Greek at St Andrews - proposed in an essay in 1910 that, at secondary level, any language would confer the intellectual benefits which Latin was commonly supposed to offer, although he would prefer if all students arriving at university had a 'simple working knowledge of two languages in addition to real attainment in the two languages or the scientific subjects which form the main work of the pupil'.²⁵ The headmistress of St Leonard's School for girls, Mary Bentinck Smith, argued likewise for the relevance to young lives of modern languages in a speech to the Classical Association in 1913: although she did not doubt that girls were as capable as boys of learning Latin, 'the spirit of the more modern literatures being more akin to the spirit of the age kindles more readily in the average mind, more especially the young mind, that spark of intellectual sympathy which is necessary for comprehension'.²⁶

The third shift was an even clearer instance of modernisation - the serious treatment of science. The general principle came from T. H. Huxley, who, in his address upon being elected Rector of Aberdeen University in 1874, had made the point rhetorically by substituting the word 'science' for 'the ancient languages' in a passage from John Stuart Mill's rectorial address at St Andrews University in 1867: 'in cultivating ... science as an essential ingredient in education, we are all the while laying an admirable foundation for ethical and philosophical culture'.²⁷ Mathematics in Scotland was always treated in this liberal fashion. For example, the requirement for Higher Grade mathematics in 1922 stipulated that the goal should be to 'encourage thought on the part of the pupils ... and maintain the feeling of unity between the different branches of Mathematical study'.²⁸ The same was argued for science by people who helped to develop the syllabus for the Leaving Certificate. For example, in 1919, J. Arthur Thomson, professor of natural history in Aberdeen, argued that 'men should seek after science primarily in the hope of clearer vision, not because of expected miracles of loaves and fishes'.²⁹

Thus the general intention of embedding a liberal curriculum in the Leaving Certificate may be summed up by a comment on Latin in 1922, by W. King Gillies, rector of the Royal High School of Edinburgh. The comment also shows the inclination to interpret the changes as modernising the tradition rather than usurping it: 'in Scotland, [Latin] was never the hall-mark of a social class, but we must prevent it becoming such now, and provide it for every genuine secondary pupil'.

Moreover, if these were the intentions, then the practice by the 1930s was not so invidious or restrictive as has often been claimed. Even though the pupils entering the five-year courses were in a minority, and even though the proportion completing them by gaining the Leaving Certificate was tiny by later standards, nevertheless the key point is that the liberal curriculum was not differentiated between old and new sectors, and thus became available as the model on which subsequent expansion for the next half century took place. In fact, just over one half of all candidates for the Leaving Certificate came from the formerly Higher Grade schools.

More light can be cast on how the new system widened access to a liberal curriculum for this highly selected but symbolically important group of pupils. The National Archives of Scotland holds detailed evidence on presentations for and passing of the Leaving Certificate, and holds comments by school inspectors on schools and on syllabuses.³⁰ In broad summary, we can say that:

- English played the same core, moral philosophical role in the old sectors as in the new.
- English displaced Latin in the old sectors as in the new: there was no sense in Scotland of English being a ‘poor man’s Latin’ as it has been claimed to have been in England, where Latin continued to dominate the curriculum of the Public Schools, and where Latin continued to lie at the heart of the highest-status curricula in the grammar schools.³¹
- French rose to prominence in the old schools as well as in the new.
- Nevertheless, Latin did not vanish in this period, and did not survive merely at the top end of a social hierarchy: it was taken in the new schools by much the same proportions of Leaving Certificate candidates as in the old.
- And science also grew in the old as much as - in fact rather more than - in the new: there was no sense that science was of lesser significance in training the mind than the humanities. The influence of scientists such as J. Arthur Thomson was profound: science was an intellectual discipline that required both theory and rigorous attention to empirical facts, and served the nation not only through its economic uses but also through its place in liberal culture. Scotland was thus a rather more faithful heir to the approach pioneered by T. H. Huxley in the previous century than was England.

Because the new schools served the lower-middle and upper-working classes, we can conclude that there was no class distinction between the kinds of secondary education offered, although there continued to be large class differences in the chances of taking part in it, despite the partial democratisation represented by the expansion of the secondary system. So not only did Scottish policy eschew the officially differentiated tracks found in France and Germany; Scotland also avoided *de facto* differentiation of the kind that was found in England: the SED’s aim of having a common system of advanced secondary schooling for the academically able was realised. It remained far more difficult for a working-class pupil than for a middle-class pupil to enter and survive in a full secondary course, but, once there, all pupils were treated more or less equally.

By the 1930s, there was also an equalising of access to the liberal curriculum in relation to gender and religion. Girls’ participation in the full liberal curriculum came

to be similar to that of boys, with the important exception of science (though they did have equal participation in mathematics): in the 1930s, no more than about a quarter of Leaving Certificate candidates taking Higher science were female, whereas girls made up around 40% all candidates. One of the reasons for the limited advance in female science at this time may have been the growth of girls' schools, because girls there were less likely to take science in the Leaving Certificate than girls in mixed schools.

The impact on opportunities for Catholics was even more striking. In the nineteenth century, Catholic schools struggled to match the standards of the public schools, mainly because of lack of educational resources of various kinds: buildings were poor, teachers more often than in the public schools did not have adequate training, and the generally low social status of the large majority of Catholics (having come as migrant labour from Ireland and elsewhere in Europe) deprived children of much in the way of educational stimulation outside the school. The educational problems of Catholics were thus the problems of education in industrial capitalism concentrated into one community. The church did manage to build up a system of elementary schools, an effort which the inspectors praised, but declined to transfer them to the school boards after 1872 for fear of Protestant domination (despite evidence in the Argyll Report of the 1860s that public schools catered well for Catholics in those areas where there was no Catholic school).³² The church also established a Catholic teacher-training college in Glasgow in 1895; a second was opened in Edinburgh in 1918-20.³³ Nevertheless the challenge of next having to set up a Catholic secondary-school system was too daunting, and so the church agreed to SED proposals that the 1918 Act would allow for the transfer of its schools to the boards, in return for being funded on the same basis as non-denominational schools and for continuing Catholic influence over the appointment of teachers and over aspects of the curriculum that pertained to Church doctrine. Nearly all Catholic primary schools were transferred by the early 1920s (as were the small number of Episcopal (Anglican) schools). Several legal cases in the 1920s established, moreover, that the boards were obliged to found and fund new Catholic schools wherever the Church deemed there to be sufficient need. Thereafter, Catholic and non-denominational secondary schooling expanded in the same way, using the same curriculum, the same Leaving Certificate courses, the same universities for specialist teachers – since Scotland never had any denominational universities – and, despite the distinct Catholic training colleges, essentially the same curriculum of teacher education.³⁴ By the 1930s, religion as such was probably no longer a barrier to obtaining a full secondary education: the continuing educational disadvantage of the Catholic community was because the Catholic population remained more working-class than the population as a whole. The Catholic schools served essentially secular purposes, especially for the most able children who could use the Leaving Certificate to gain access to the universities and the professions: the proportion of pupils from Catholic schools among candidates for the Leaving Certificate rose from 4% in 1911 to 11% in 1935, while the proportion of Catholics in the age-17 age group remained approximately stable at around 11-13%.³⁵

So, in summing up this first period of reform, to the 1930s, we can draw more complex conclusions than is common. It is true that, as is usually pointed out, secondary schooling remained sharply divided: it was still the case that the full liberal education was experienced only by a minority, and indeed a very small minority if we take the most restrictive definition of that curriculum, the actual passing of the

Leaving Certificate. Nevertheless, there was significant extension of access, in that the new schools provided a liberal curriculum to the most able children in areas populated mainly by lower-middle-class and skilled-working class families. The most important point for the rest of the century was thus that the principle was being established that a proper secondary education had to rest on a modernised liberal education, transferring to the senior years of the secondary school the principles of breadth, rigour and, through literary studies, reflection on human existence that previously had been a characteristic of the undergraduate curriculum at university.

3. The consolidation of reform: 1950s

We jump forward now for our next body of evidence to examine this new system as it stabilised after the Second World War. There are three reasons to look at the 1950s and early 1960s in more detail. The first is pragmatic: for the first time, survey data are available. Whereas the information on which the discussion of the 1920s and 1930s was based came from the National Archives and published sources, and thus related almost entirely to institutions rather than individuals, the 1947 Scottish Mental Survey allows us to trace the experience of individual pupils while still setting that in the context of the institutional changes from earlier in the century.³⁶ The survey covered a representative sample of around 1,200 pupils who were born in 1936, who thus transferred to secondary school mainly in 1947 and left school mainly between 1950 and 1953, re-interviewing them annually until 1963; it collected information about education after school, about entry to employment, and about their home life. The project was conducted by the Scottish Council for Research in Education as part of its programme of research that is discussed by Lawn and Deary in their chapter in this volume. Detailed information was collected in the survey about the schools which the sample members attended, and so we can relate the experience of the respondents to the history of the secondary schools that we have been considering.

That pragmatic, methodological point is not the sole reason to look at this period, because the experience of the 1950s was the source of pressure for the radical reforms that came next: that is, the pressure for comprehensive secondary schooling - the ending of all selection for secondary school in the public sector - and also the beginnings of fundamental change to the curriculum. A third reason to look at the 1950s is that they formed the immediate background to Davie's own writing, a point to which we will return at the end of the chapter.

The secondary-school system of the 1950s was the consolidated version of the system that was put in place by the end of the 1930s. Formally, it consisted of two kinds of courses, senior and junior secondary. In practice, that became in the urban areas senior and junior secondary schools, the latter offering only three-year courses that did not lead to national certification, the former offering five-year courses and in the majority of cases three-year courses as well. But the schools and courses that were defined administratively in that way were the heirs to the process of reform earlier in the century that we have looked at. So for this period, too, we can investigate whether the earlier reforms - the new schools - were providing opportunities to wider groups of pupils who were not served well by the oldest schools whose founding pre-dated the reforms.

The Leaving Certificate stopped being a group certificate after 1950, so that pupils could gain evidence that recorded the results of examination in individual subjects. But the character of these subjects, and the overall philosophy of the courses, had

barely changed: it remained the core of a liberal education extended to senior school pupils. Moreover, the highest status was accorded to combinations of subjects that would have obtained a Group Award before 1951. Thus the curricular philosophy of the Leaving Certificate remained as it had been established in the 1920s, summed up for example in the SED guidelines for teaching English literature: 'the main aim ... is not so much the imparting of information as the inculcation of a liberal culture'.³⁷

The analysis of this 1950s evidence reaches similar conclusions to those for the 1930s, and thus suggests that the contemporary and subsequent pessimism about the operation of the selective system in the 1950s was somewhat excessive. In brief, four points may be made about the 1950s. First, the 1950s data confirm that the reforms of the first four decades of the century were continuing to provide to much wider segments of the population a model of secondary schooling that had previously been confined mainly to the children of the professional classes. The offering of selective opportunities to all classes was particularly evident in the newer sectors of senior-secondary school, notably the former Higher Grade schools. In the 1950s, the distribution of social classes within these newer secondary schools was close to the distribution across the national sample as a whole. If the former Higher Grade schools, and other secondary schools founded in the 1920s and 1930s, had not offered these opportunities, then the proportion of able lower-status pupils who would have had access to senior-secondary courses would have been about a quarter less than it actually was; in the lowest class of all, the fall would have been over one half. A similar point was specifically true of Catholic schools: by the 1950s, there were no directly denominational differences in opportunities to enter academic courses, as opposed to differences associated with socio-economic status (which in turn was still associated with denomination), and progress in these courses depended on pupils' measured intelligence in the same way in the Catholic as in the non-denominational sectors.³⁸

Second, social class and ability were related to progress and attainment in the newer schools in the same way as in the older ones. The effect of social class on progress towards the Leaving Certificate examinations, and attainment in them, operated within schools and was not exhausted by the process of allocating children to schools. The same was true of ability. Nevertheless, there was no evidence that class operated differently in schools of different kinds. Moreover, although there was a class segmentation between sectors, the old, highest-status schools did not exclude the lowest-status classes, and there was a significant presence of working-class pupils in all sectors, whether new or ancient.

Third, girls gained unprecedented opportunities as well, and except in science had the same opportunities as boys. With that exception, girls were participating in Leaving Certificate courses in similar proportions to boys, maintaining in the post-war world the gains they had made in the 1920s and 1930s. Even in science, around one third of candidates for examination were female, probably somewhat higher than in the 1930s.

Thus the reforms of the first few decades of the twentieth century had widened opportunity. It is true that the selective system of the 1950s did not operate in a fully merit-selective fashion in its allocation of pupils to courses: social class influenced children's progress even once they had been allocated to schools and courses³⁹ However, that was probably a consequence of the relationship between educability and the wider social structure rather than of any failure of the reformers' intent. It is

likely that class operated in ways that did not stop when a child was sent to secondary school: lack of financial resources, lack of social and cultural capital, and lack of aspirations by both the family and the child would have restricted children's development after age 12 just as effectively as they did at earlier ages, even among children with high measured intelligence at age 12.⁴⁰ The main point, however, is that if being working class was a disadvantage in being allocated to five-year courses and in making progress on them, it was no greater or lesser a disadvantage in the newer sectors than in the older. The uniformity of the class effects across sector might indicate the limits of reform to the school system in overcoming structural inequalities in society, but it might also illustrate that the reforms successfully extended an older model of schooling to a much wider population.

So the conclusions to be drawn from this period in the middle of the century are, as with the conclusions for the earlier period, more complex than has often been claimed. The advantage of placing the 1950s experience in the longer perspective of schooling reform going back half a century is that it forces us to view the 1950s dynamically. Seen in isolation, as they were by contemporaries, they appeared as a period of stasis; and on the whole that static view is how they have been seen ever since. But seen as the period when half a century of cautious reform came to fruition, they appear in a much more favourable light as offering to working-class children, girls and Catholics opportunities that, without these earlier reforms, they would have been denied. The worst that can be said about the reforms of the 1920s and earlier was that they were not strong enough to overcome the effects of social structure: they were specifically educational reforms, not social reforms.

4. The extension of reform

What then happened from the 1960s onwards was that educational policy and practice came to be expected to do a lot more than operate on education itself: it would henceforth have to overcome the effects of social structure. This change in expectation came about for two main reasons. One was political ambition allied with political caution: politicians wanted still to overcome social ills, but were not so willing as in 1945 to engage in large-scale redistribution of wealth and income. So they tried to use education as a lever to bring about equality. The second reason we will come to shortly.

The central policy was the ending of selection into different kinds of secondary course in the public sector. The new comprehensive schools were accepted so swiftly and so relatively uncontroversially in Scotland - by the mid-1970s - that the country did not in fact call any of its secondary schools 'comprehensive': there are no 'comprehensive' schools, only 'schools' (usually called 'high schools' or 'academies', terms that themselves indicate allegiance to older traditions).

The structural reform was followed by reforms to curriculum and to examinations to cater adequately for the vastly expanded and more diverse population of pupils. These changes started just before the ending of selection, with the creation of the Ordinary Grade in 1962, providing fourth-year pupils of moderate ability with a ladder towards Highers in fifth year. Then this principle was taken further: in the reforms that eventually led to the Standard Grade courses by the mid-1980s, proper courses were planned for the whole range of ability. The intention of this reform was firmly in the tradition of widening access to a modernised version of the liberal curriculum. Conceived out of Paul Hirst's analysis of the nature of knowledge,⁴¹ and

his conclusion that, for the purposes of the school curriculum, knowledge may be organised into about eight modes of thought, the report that led to the introduction of Standard Grade proposed that all pupils should engage in all these modes of study - for example, linguistic, literary, mathematical, scientific and so on. For pupils in their mid-teenage years, this was firmly in line with the whole inherited tradition - not only with the ideas which had led to the Highers, but also with the philosophy which had in turn shaped these, from the old undergraduate curriculum. The proposals expressed goals for the curriculum that came straight out of that same tradition, for example asserting that 'socially relevant issues can[not] really be explored without making use of the insights provided by the various traditions of intellectual enquiry' and that 'there are many activities and experiences which do not seem to have any direct bearing on the social realities of pupils' lives, but which none the less have a profoundly liberating effect'.⁴²

The evidence on the effects of all these reforms is rich and complex because of the existence of the series of Scottish School Leavers' Surveys starting in effect in 1962-3, and then continuing biennially from 1971 until after the end of the century. This series allows the same kind of detailed analysis as the 1947 survey which gave us evidence about the 1950s, presented in the subtle and extensive programme of evaluation that was conducted by the Centre for Educational Sociology at Edinburgh University led by Andrew McPherson⁴³

The research showed that the structural reform itself had some of the intended effect, in that social-class differences in attainment by the end of schooling were narrowed somewhat, and that girls' average attainment rose to match and then overtake that of boys. Attainment of pupils in Catholic schools rose particularly strongly because of the effect on the social-class differences. Because the remaining educational disadvantage of the Catholic population in the 1950s had been due to social disadvantage, a reform that extended opportunities for a full secondary education to all social-class groups had a disproportionate effect on Catholics. The result was that, by the 1980s, the attainment of pupils in Catholic schools was better than would have been expected from their social status alone.⁴⁴ The long-term consequences of the several phases of denominational reform that ultimately were due to the 1918 Act was that Catholics came to have equal access to the professions and to full citizenship.⁴⁵

The structural reforms to secondary schooling were part of wider reforms that included also post-school education – the expansion of higher education from the 1960s, accelerating from the 1980s, and an expansion of adult education to serve a different kind of purpose from when it was mainly to compensate for lost opportunities in the inadequate old school system. Both these changes were offered as educational routes to the deepening of citizenship – in the Robbins report of 1963 which inaugurated half a century of higher-education expansion (across the UK), and in the Alexander report of 1975 which argued for adult education on the grounds that 'it is only where people have developed their own unique individualities that social ideals of the highest order emerge.'⁴⁶

The changes to the school curriculum did extend access to a broad programme of liberal study, especially for working-class children and girls. Indeed, the low female participation in science that we have noted from early in the century to the 1950s was finally ended. Nevertheless, the most effective of the new schools in narrowing social-class differences in attainment were not on the whole the new comprehensive schools

created afresh in the 1960s and 1970s but rather those older schools that served a whole community, dating mostly from the earlier reforms which we have been looking at here. The old omnibus school which was attended by most children in the community had been, before the 1960s, internally selective, but made the transition to a less-selective era fairly smoothly. In the words of Gray, McPherson and Raffe in their definitive account of these changes published in 1983, 'the form of comprehensive education that sustains' the claims made by its advocates 'is not the one introduced by the post-1965 reorganisation, but one arising out of an older and traditional form in Scottish education, the omnibus school'.⁴⁷

What happened next would take us into current policy, and so I will refrain from going further except to note that the conclusions that were drawn after the 1970s from the only partial success of the comprehensive reforms have disrupted the inherited debate about the curriculum for the first time.⁴⁸ Until Standard Grade, it was taken as given that the purpose of a liberal education was to give access to the best that has been thought and said: the curriculum, as in Hirst's analysis, was defined by the structure of knowledge. By the 1970s, the view emerging in the new sociology of the curriculum - pioneered in Britain by Basil Bernstein and colleagues at the London Institute of Education, and associated internationally with Pierre Bourdieu - was that the problem of access lay precisely in such inherited cultural structures. That was the second reason for the emergence of the belief that reform to education should be expected to overcome the effects of social structure - the view that a major reason for social inequalities of outcome in education was the education process itself. In particular, Bourdieu, Bernstein and their followers argued, the curriculum of liberal education was itself alienating of children who were not from the core, middle-class and English-speaking segments of society.

This belief was slower coming to Scotland than to other places, but it has dominated debate about the curriculum since the 1980s. Simplifying enormously, we can say that from this line of thinking has come the questioning of subjects as the components out of which the whole curriculum is built, the defining of the purpose of the curriculum as being to enable the pupil to enjoy learning, and the notion that all learning has to be judged by its practical utility. Indeed so hegemonic have these ideas become in the past quarter of a century that it is sometimes difficult to think of them as being historically contingent. But they would certainly not have been self-evident to most of the reformers who created the Scottish secondary system that we have been looking at in this paper.

5. Conclusion

There are four points to be made in conclusion of this sketch of a history. First, from the beginning of the century until a generation after the ending of selection among schools in the public sector, the aim of reforming policy was to widen access to a liberal curriculum that was a recurrently modernised version of the old undergraduate curriculum which Davie said died with late-nineteenth century reforms.

The second point is that, in having this reforming aim as a strong strand within its developing policy on education, Scotland was absolutely normal. As the main goal of reforming educational policy, that widening of access to a liberal curriculum was a common theme throughout Europe and North America until the 1950s. However, elsewhere too, and rather earlier than in Scotland, scepticism about the inherited form of liberal education gradually permeated all curriculum planning. Liberal education

came to be seen, not as a universal prize to be aimed for, but as itself the reason why children from outside the dominant culture were less likely to succeed in education than children who had acquired that culture from their families. Eventually, Scotland too has come round to this point of view, with gradual and now fundamental reforms to the school curriculum; that is no longer history, but current politics.

Third, these specific conclusions then lead to a methodological one. To judge whether any particular period is radical or conservative, it is not enough to take the opinions of contemporaries on it. Neither is it enough to evaluate only what was deliberately attempted in that period and what was the outcome within that period. Put differently: the 1930s or the 1950s or the 1970s ought not to be judged on their own if we want to reach a proper understanding of the scope for reform. The 1930s, despite the policy restrictions of the 1920s, saw the stabilising of reforms that had been inaugurated at the very beginning of the century. The SED restricted expansion after 1924, but did not reverse what had previously been put in place. The effects of these previous reforms were still being worked through in the 1920s and 1930s.

The 1950s, likewise, was a period of consolidating the older reforms - the 1930s stabilisation of the pre-1920s expansion. Again we were able to conclude that the opportunities available to working-class children (and girls and Catholics) were much greater than they would have been without these earlier reforms. A reform - the creation of the Higher Grade schools after 1903 - was still achieving marked effects half a century later. Sir Henry Craik and Sir John Struthers were more radical than they imagined or than their critics have ever allowed. Without them there would not have been the senior-secondary sector serving some four out of ten pupils in the 1950s that could become the model on which the non-selective schools could be created after the 1960s. Conservative though they were in many respects, Craik and Struthers had created the defining institutions and the defining liberal curriculum of a core element of social democratic policy. But maybe the political conundrum is not so great if we allow ourselves also to accept that Tory Unionism was, when they were operating, still a remarkably creative force. Nevertheless, if Craik and Struthers set the process in motion, their successors were responsible for maintaining it. It is anachronistic to suppose that being radical entails doing something new: it can equally well be allowing the radical potential of inherited structures to be realised. A structure once created can then be used by a later generation to do things that its originators would never have envisaged. Up to the 1950s, that is broadly what happened to the system bequeathed by the pre-First-World-War changes. In Alasdair MacIntyre's words, 'an adequate sense of tradition manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present'.⁴⁹

We finish back with Davie, as one always does, infuriatingly but in tribute to his wayward genius. He was wrong in many fundamental respects. He did not see that to understand the influence of education on Scotland from the late-nineteenth century to the 1980s, at least, the university curriculum was less immediately relevant than what was taught at secondary school. Davie's evident lack of interest in sociology here has its most deleterious effect: he simply failed to notice that, in the first few decades of the twentieth century, secondary schools were taking over the traditional role of the elementary years of the universities, or that the nineteenth-century universities in Scotland had played a role that in England, France and Prussia had been taken by early forms of secondary schooling.

Davie was thus also wrong about the Scottish Education Department. It was not only not the unimaginative bureaucracy that he portrayed it as being: in the new system of secondary schools that in the 1920s was formed from the Higher Grade schools, it transformed the extent of secondary schooling in a manner that remained attached to inherited structures of knowledge through the Leaving Certificate. Indeed, insofar as most of the Higher Grade schools had themselves been created out of a tradition of parish schools where higher subjects had been taught, even the structural changes were firmly in keeping with the older practices. He was wrong too in his view that radical ideas were always merely mechanical and never consistent with tradition: the subtle interplay of even the most radical of reforming ideas with tradition is evident only if a more historically accurate approach to the evidence is taken than he ever did. The point is that the SED was both deeply conservative and also gradually persuaded of the virtue of widening access to the inherited curriculum; and by being conservative it also was able to ground the extended school system in a cultural tradition that a sharper kind of radical break would never have achieved. Unless we - unlike Davie - can find a way of understanding that, we will never grasp properly the nature of change in Scottish education or in Scotland generally.

But that then also allows us to say that, in a much deeper sense than concerns the ephemeral politics of successive moments in the process of change, Davie was right. Without fully appreciating why, he correctly pointed out the centrality of the liberal curriculum to the Scottish tradition, and the central importance of democratising access to it in the nation's educational politics. He was also right in an important sense that has not yet been resolved in policy or in democratic practice. If the central educational problem for democracy, as Davie suggested, is how to ensure sufficient expertise and wisdom in our rulers, then it matters profoundly whether a liberal curriculum can be made democratically available without diluting its intellectual rigour. That is the important essence of the Scottish dilemma. The real context of Davie's writing was not the late-nineteenth-century university reforms, nor even, really, the Scottish Education Department's policies on teaching in the 1920s. The actual context is his own time - the ending of selection for secondary school and the first stages in the massive expansion of higher education. The question for his time was whether these bold changes would undermine the tradition. He feared they might, but was caught in the dilemma of knowing that the populist appeal of widening access was irresistible. The answer until the 1980s still seemed to be that the dilemma could be evaded - that democratisation and the maintenance of the old standards were compatible with each other. That that no longer seems to be widely accepted, and that populism seems to be more powerful than standards, is why we still have to return repeatedly to Davie's dilemmas.

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